

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

7-2-2008

FAQ#5: Why Can't the Chinese Authorities Allow a Little Space for Protests during the Olympics?

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

"FAQ#5: Why Can't the Chinese Authorities Allow a Little Space for Protests during the Olympics?" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 163.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/163>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

FAQ#5: Why Can't the Chinese Authorities Allow a Little Space for Protests during the Olympics?

July 2, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [4 comments](#)

Of course, the easy answer to this question is: Because there is almost no freedom of assembly in China and there are big restrictions on freedom of expression. But I have started to realize that this answer is too simple. The people I have been talking to, even well-educated and international people, have a gut reaction to the idea of public protests that is unfavorable.

I have been discussing the issue of protests during the Olympic Games with Chinese colleagues, friends, and acquaintances from academic, government, and corporate backgrounds. The people whose views I summarize here are college-educated (in China), middle-class, internationally-informed (but not educated abroad), and between the ages of 30 and 55. I would guess that their political stance is close to the mainstream (though since Chinese people don't vote for top leaders, there's no clear barometer of their political stances like "Republican" or "Democrat").

Some of them expressed that the protests surrounding the torch relay presented a new view of the West, because they did not fully understand that such protests are common there. My guess is that while they knew about them, perhaps they had never seen so many visual images on TV and in the media. However, it seems to me that the way in which this coverage was handled in China left many people with the false impression that protests like these occur in London and Paris nearly every day, a portrait they regard with distaste. Let me try to outline the system of beliefs that produces this reaction.

First, there is the cultural background of host-guest relations. There is a highly-refined protocol between a host and a guest in China; this also extends to Chinese conventions for the expression of mutual respect between states, which historically were more highly developed than that of the West. Chinese people see large sporting events as part of the cycle of host-guest reciprocity: when I host a major sport event, I invite you to my home as my guest, and there I put you in the seat of honor, feed you the special foods and give you the special gifts unique to my hometown. The cultural performances in the Olympic opening ceremonies are said to be like the unique foods that you receive as my guest, which are not available in your hometown. In the summer of 2006 He Zhenliang, China's senior member in the International Olympic Committee, spoke passionately to me about hosts and guests when I interviewed him for an essay that the IOC had invited me to write for their official magazine, *The Olympic Review*. [Lest readers of my previous post think that the censorship practiced by the Foreign Languages Press is unique to China, I will note that that essay was ultimately cut down to 1/3 of its original length, eliminating, among other things, this entire section, which I did not directly attribute to him. So I published it in the final chapter of my recent book, *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China*.]

For Mr. He, the Beijing Games were China's opportunity to return the hospitality of the other host nations who had previously invited China into their homes, and to welcome the world as a guest to China's home. He anticipated that there would be negative Western media coverage and he explained to me that Chinese people see this as disrespectful, because it is as if the host invited a guest to his home and the guest responded by criticizing the host. He cited Pierre de

Coubertin's notion of "*le respect mutuel*," and stated that journalism that serves the West's appetite for "curiosities" – highlighting China's differences with the West rather than its commonalities, its deficiencies rather than its accomplishments – is disrespectful to China and to the Olympic ideals.

In conversations with more average Chinese people I have encountered the same reaction. In the Chinese tradition, host-guest meetings are highly ritualized and ceremonial, and are not supposed to be occasions for straightforward debate. Or, put another way, the Olympic Games are an occasion when the guest should respect the "face" of the host. The image of protests taking place outside the Bird's Nest Stadium, where a splendid ceremony of international friendship is supposed to be taking place, would be "ugly" or "not good to look at" (不好看). Everyone recognizes that this means they are engaging in "appearance-ism" (形式主义), which is said to be a key feature of Chinese society (sometimes jokingly, sometimes with some bitterness). The proverb that "family shame should not be made public" (家丑不可外扬) is often quoted to express it. As one of my colleagues put it: It's like when there is a wedding in the family. Actually, the members of the family do not get along with each other. But they put on a show for outsiders during the wedding. I noted that Americans have similar feelings, but she countered by stating that Chinese people have particularly strong feelings about this. As a result, if someone chooses to disrupt the proceedings, it is an indicator that the internal conflicts are so great that the collective is threatened. And in China this is a thought that seems to evoke fear.

Needless to say, this is the context within which protests by Chinese Tibetans during the Olympic Games would be judged. Perhaps this is one reason that the Dalai Lama, who should understand Chinese culture well enough to know this, has recently come out with strong statements against the disruption of the Olympic Games through protests.

An acquaintance who has a degree in international relations further observed that in China the custom is to *first* invite the guest to your home to allow him/her to "understand" you and build trust, and *only later* to try to talk through differences. "Mutual understanding" (互相理解) facilitates the later negotiations. To try to work out all differences ahead of time would be ridiculous. I probably don't need to add that this particular custom is one that many Westerners are forced to learn in dealing with Chinese partners – but having been forced to learn it, they find that it is actually a better way of forming human relations. It is also probably a more accurate description of what is happening through the Beijing Olympic Games – they are more accurately perceived as the starting point for a closer relationship between China and the outside world than a nuptial ceremony marking a permanent intimate bond.

A related factor is the negative Chinese attitude toward criticism. On this point, cultural differences with the West are difficult to pinpoint because there are many frames in which Chinese people seem freer with criticism than Westerners. For example, a friend who runs into you on the sidewalk will say, "Your expression is bad," or "Have you put on weight?" The Xinhua sport reporter [Qu Beilin](#) has written a series of essays in the past year trying to help Chinese people understand Westerners because, having covered the 1993 and 2001 IOC Sessions that voted on Beijing's Olympic bids, he had an urgent intuition that China did not understand the West and it had better try to do so before the Beijing Games. In his essays, a recurring theme is that the reason Chinese people don't understand what Westerners really think about them is

that Westerners are too polite to criticize you to your face. Nevertheless, Chinese people generally seem to feel that “critics” are negatively regarded in China. [Yi Jiandong](#), whose blog I translated in one of my earlier posts, said that the tagline on his blogsite, “*Yi Jiandong’s space: an independent critical voice, realizing the value of constructive action, growing along with the Olympics,*” had largely received negative reactions because readers do not understand how a critical voice can be socially constructive. He noted that his student evaluations often judge him harshly for the critical views that he presents in his classes, because they consider it arrogant to put oneself morally above others and criticize them. He observed that a common attitude toward criticism is that it “undermines the collective.”

People in official leadership positions very often do not grasp the concept that criticism can have a constructive function, either, and that is why they do not appreciate the watchdog function that a free media could play if it were free to criticize them. Even less so do they appreciate that Western media criticism of China could have a constructive function. I feel that in evaluating their viewpoints it is important to keep in mind that the current cohort of leadership in China which is 50-60 years old came of age during the Cultural Revolution, when they were exposed to practices of extreme criticism which were very destructive. A constructive response to criticism is based on mutual trust. As a teacher, I have noticed that most of my students must learn to engage with and respond to criticism rather than to get angry and retreat, which seems to be the human knee-jerk reaction. There is a generation of people in power in China right now in whom a healthy approach to criticism may never have been cultivated.

There is also a pragmatic reason that my Chinese acquaintances do not think that “protest zones” are feasible. They all subscribe to what I might call the “powder-keg” theory of Chinese society. They feel that because of growing inequities Chinese society is unstable, and that one public protest could ignite another and another, and soon the whole country would be protesting and everything would collapse. That in the West it might be common for one group to hold public protests while everyone else just walks by on their way to work is hard to comprehend. They state that the problem of “surrounding onlookers” (围观) is common in China. If there were a protest zone outside the Bird’s Nest Stadium, soon a crowd would gather. Before you know it, you’d have a riot.

I have to admit that I have some sympathy to this view. In the 1980s I was trapped three different times in Chinese crowds that were on the verge of losing control, and it was a scary experience. But crowds seem much better-behaved these days, and anyway no security forces were present on those occasions. Westerners see protest zones as a way of ensuring that demonstrations are controlled and do *not* lead to widespread rioting, but my Chinese respondents did not hold this view, and across the board felt that they would spark rioting rather than control it. They also do not subscribe to the Western theory that allowing a space for protest can defuse a conflict by “letting off steam.” One colleague argued that the custom of protesting is different in China, and that Chinese only protest when they have been pushed to the point of no return. Therefore it is not possible for protests to perform the function of “venting” (发泄) on a limited scale. My acquaintances stated that the social problems facing China today are too complex to be solved immediately and that is why it would be better to keep the lid on protests for the near future. They felt that continued rapid economic development is the only hope for the resolution of these problems.

Several of the people I talked to said that the only way “protest zones” could be implemented would be if they were located in an isolated area away from the events, as was the case for the 1995 NGO meetings in Huairou. I noted with interest June 9 [reports](#) stating that, starting in July, the Beijing government had decided to relocate provincial residents coming to Beijing to petition government offices into the World Park in Fengtai, a 6.7-hectare amusement park with reduced-scale displays of 50 countries. “Beijing news revealed that how to handle the petitioners from various places venting their dissatisfaction had all along been a difficult key problem for the security of the Beijing Olympics.” The report further stated that “this measure imitates the model of England’s ‘Hyde Park’; in the ‘World Park,’ petitioners can carry out speeches, protests and demonstrations, demonstrating that the authorities are “people-oriented” (以人为本) and respect human rights, and at the same time avoiding disturbing the conduct of the Olympic Games.” The petitioners would be given food and drink inside the park. I might mention that when I raised the question of protest with The China Beat’s co-organizer Jeff Wasserstrom, an expert on Chinese protests, he mentioned [Hyde Park’s “Speaker’s Corner”](#) as a possible alternative to the Salt Lake City model. I’m not qualified to assess whether this actually demonstrates any progress in human rights: one of my Chinese colleagues did feel it was good that petitioners had been given their own space, while Western journalists think that it is an attempt to “disappear” them.

What interests me is the rather unusual choice of location. It evokes the amusing idea that any foreigners who apply for permission to protest during the Olympic Games might be given a time and space at the World Park, perhaps even in front of their own country’s exhibit, where they would be just another exotic performance. This somewhat reflects the spirit in which my Chinese friend recalls the protest demonstrations at the NGO meeting site in Huairou during the 1995 UN Women’s Conference. Based on my discussions, I feel that this is one of the few places where protests by foreigners could be acceptable to those in charge of Beijing’s Olympic security as well as to the average middle-class Chinese person. Conversely, if the authorities allowed a space for unruly protests near the main sports events, public opinion would probably be against it.

I would like to make clear that what I have tried to do here is to outline common Chinese attitudes about public protests during the Beijing Olympics. These ideas are not my own and I am not saying that they are accurate from a social-scientific perspective – but that is another question. And I have not analyzed the real power differences and political structure that are another important part of the picture – people in leadership positions don’t have to accept media criticism because their job security depends almost entirely on the leaders above them who appointed them and not on public transparency. However, it seems to me that this political structure is at least partly supported by a cultural context that is not supportive of public protests such as are common in the West.

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)